To Catch a Mole

Beyond deciding how to deal with those who disclose classified information, the Pentagon has been working on an older and more basic problem: how to screen out security risks. Increasingly, the Pentagon is turning to the lie detector for this purpose. In 1983, the last year for which a count is available, the Defense Department administered 21,000 routine polygraph checks to its employees. This year, with special congressional authorization, some 3,500 key officials who have access to highly secret information, or may be under consideration for such access, will be given additional polygraph tests. They will be specifically designed to see whether those being examined have already divulged military secrets or may be inclined to do so. The tests may be given on a random basis.

The new screening is needed now, explains Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Richard Stilwell, because "the Soviet Union and its surrogates have become far more active in their covert quest for America's secrets. We have ten people awaiting trial on espionage charges, the highest figure in recent memory." Those selected for special testing will be mostly medium- and high-level officials, among them civilians, uniformed officers and even private contractors.
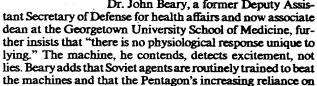
The new tests will center on six key questions, asking if those examined have ever 1) engaged in espionage or sabotage against the U.S., 2) known anyone who has, 3) been approached to give or sell classified materials to unauthorized people (including journalists), 4) done so, 5) known anyone who has done so, or 6) made any unauthorized contact with representatives of a foreign government.

Stilwell insists that anyone failing the test would merely lose access to sensitive information while a further investigation was conducted to see whether the polygraph findings properly had designated the person as a security risk. Stilwell says the Pentagon is aware that a polygraph test is not wholly reliable, but he is satisfied that it is a useful tool since it has "an accuracy between 75% and 90%" when administered by skilled examiners.

Critics of the polygraph, which measures pulse rate, blood pressure, breathing patterns and perspiration, contend that it is most apt to be wrong in random screening where the tested person is not asked about a specific act of wrongdoing. Dr. John Beary, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for health affairs and now associate dean at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, further insists that "there is no physiological response unique to lying." The machine, he contends, detects excitement, not lies. Beary adds that Soviet agents are routinely trained to beat the machines and that the Pentagon's increasing reliance on the polygraph thus may actually be harmful to U.S. security.

Polygraph Proponent Richard Stilwell

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